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## Evaluation vs. Grading in Honors Composition Or How I Learned to Stop Worrying about Grades and Love Teaching

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ANNMARIE GUZY

# **Evaluation vs. Grading in Honors Composition Or How I Learned to Stop Worrying about Grades and Love Teaching**

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As a professor of composition and technical communication, I have had extensive training for and experience with evaluating student writing. The intellectual work of composition as an academic discipline manifests itself in three areas: rhetorically-based composition theory, empirical research of both qualitative and quantitative natures, and—unlike other disciplines aside from education—the applications of that theory and research to build sound teaching practices. In the pedagogical third of our scholarship, compositionists learn not only to design syllabi and assignments that will meet educational goals for students who will need to argue, research, and write at the postsecondary level, but also to establish criteria and develop techniques for useful evaluation of student performance.

As early as the master's level, graduate teaching assistants typically take a course on theory and practice in composition before or during their first semester of teaching. They do not lead laboratory sections or grade papers for a professor; rather, they are fully responsible for teaching at least one composition course, more likely two or more, for their school's freshman writing program. At times, undergraduate students in my technical writing courses, particularly those majoring in hard sciences or engineering, express their surprise that although I have a Ph.D., I continue to grade all their papers myself rather than assigning this seemingly onerous task to a graduate assistant. As a professor, I have indeed supervised graduate students who assisted with my research projects, and I have mentored teaching assistants through their first year of teaching, but I have always personally graded all of the assignments from all of my courses.

## EVALUATION VS. GRADING IN HONORS COMPOSITION

Why? Because the evaluation of student writing in a composition course is inextricably intertwined with the course goal to improve not only writing features but overall critical thinking and argumentation skills. I am sometimes envious of colleagues both within and outside my department who can use assignments and exams simply to gauge what material a student has retained, whether through demonstrations of facility with formulae, memorization of terminology or dates, or completion of SCANTRON-based multiple-choice exams in which students match quotations and characters to titles of works read throughout the semester. Even with the growth of postsecondary initiatives such as writing across the curriculum and writing to learn, I have found that many colleagues, when faced with the administrative mandate to incorporate a writing assignment into their courses, are unprepared to evaluate the paper for any features beyond accuracy of content and (mis)perceptions of correctness in grammar and punctuation, often falling back on the red scribbles that freshman composition teachers made on their own essays twenty or thirty years ago.

Grading undergraduate writing, however, entails far more rigorous work than making arcane, blood-red symbols across every page and then writing some dismissive, arrogant summation that rationalizes the low grade assigned at the end. Evaluation of student writing should not be predicated solely on *what* the student says but also *how* she says it; not on how many sources she uses in her research paper but whether she uses them effectively in supporting her argument; not on her advanced vocabulary but whether she uses language innately or relies on the thesaurus function to supply pompous verbiage in a misguided attempt to impress the teacher. In short, thoughtful evaluation of student writing can be an exhausting task.

Ideally, this burden of evaluation should be alleviated in the honors composition course; if the students could not write well, they would have been denied admission into the honors course and/or honors program (a good number of writing programs have honors composition courses that exist apart from any honors program, but for the purposes of this essay, I will focus on honors composition courses that serve students from an honors program). I should be able to scan easily through each student's masterpiece, lifting my pen only to inscribe a bright, shiny A+ at the bottom of the last page. As we are all well aware, however, national test scores may not accurately reflect a student's writing ability, nor may application essays that have been endlessly revised, polished, or even ghostwritten before submission. Although many incoming honors students were proficient writers in high school, even the best writers need a period of transition and acclimation to the writing, research, and argumentation skills that they will need to succeed at the postsecondary level, especially in an honors program.

Having written several articles and the NCHC monograph on honors composition, I feel well qualified to discuss the evaluation of honors students' writing. The core of my professional research program is the study of honors composition, more specifically the academic writing of freshman honors students. In a recent research project, I constructed identical syllabi and assignments for regular and honors sections of freshman composition so that I could compare quantitatively measurable characteristics in the students' papers. Early results demonstrated that, given the same assignments, the honors students wrote longer papers with longer sentence structures and fewer grammatical and mechanical errors than the non-honors students. Fewer errors, however, does not mean error-free, nor do longer sentences overcome overly pretentious word choice or Yoda-esque syntax.

In my writing courses, therefore, "better than average" does not automatically translate into an A grade, and therein lies the rub for students in my honors composition class and for myself as well. I like *evaluating* my honors students' writing, but I hate *grading* it; put another way, I enjoy reading their texts and helping them to improve their writing, but I have come to loathe watching the facial contortions and slumping body language as the students tear past all of my carefully-worded comments and go straight to the letter grade. I have developed a set of strategies for paper-return day—distributing papers at the end of class, stationing myself at the door to encourage students to leave with the papers and groan elsewhere, and instituting a 48-hour moratorium on coming to my office to complain about their grades—and yet directly outside the door lingers a huge cluster of students who seem to care more about comparing their grades than reading what I said about their writing. On my more cynical days, I wonder if this is the result of the archetypal ropes-course, community-building freshman retreat: they still whine about their grades, but they whine together as a group.

Naturally, the fault is mine because I gave them a B or a C, and, especially during the first paper of the semester, mine may be the first assignment of their entire academic careers for which they did not earn an A. According to hallway lore, I am the author of many such auspicious moments, and I am always bemused by the fact that they will take credit for *earning* an A grade but that grades of B and below are *given* to them. Granted, receiving the first graded paper of the semester can be a trying time in any lower- or upper-division writing course; this is the time when students must begin to adapt their writing styles to the mythical "what the teacher wants." While the levels of cognitive dissonance at facing this academic challenge are relatively constant among students across my writing courses, the level of affective dissonance coming from my honors freshmen can be overwhelming, and I find myself positioned at the start of the arduous process of separating their

## EVALUATION VS. GRADING IN HONORS COMPOSITION

self-worth from their grades. Who are they if not the students who earn straight As? If such a thing as a “textbook” honors student exists, that young person has probably been rewarded frequently and consistently for academic achievement throughout the previous twelve years, and a good portion of her self-esteem has become cemented to these achievements, which most readily boil down to the common quantitative denominators of GPA and test scores. When I then “give” her a C on the first paper, she somehow interprets this as my dislike of not only her paper but herself as well. This is particularly troublesome when students perceive the evaluation of writing as utterly subjective, unlike the fill-in-the-dot tests or math and science exams in which correct and incorrect answers are objectively marked, at least in the students’ minds.

Honors students also experience difficulties learning to separate the grade from what they have actually learned in a course. I share with them that I learned and retained more information from some courses in which I earned a hard B than from some “blow-off” classes in which I received an easy A, all while still earning a 3.79 GPA and graduating from my own undergraduate honors program. Shifting their focus to life after college, I ask whether they have ever queried professionals in their prospective fields regarding GPAs. For example, our campus has a medical school with an early admissions program, and at least fifty percent of our incoming honors freshmen are planning to attend medical school, so I ask them whether they have ever asked their own physicians about their undergraduate GPAs, transcripts, test scores, and such. None ever has. We then discuss why pre-med students believe that they must maintain a 4.0 GPA to be admitted to medical school and whether grades can predict such intrinsic characteristics as good bedside manner. For some students, separating learning from grades can be a painful revelation, and not all are successful at it. On the occasions when I have caught an honors student committing plagiarism, I internally acknowledge the pressure that these students face to maintain their academic standing, but I also feel brokenhearted over the fact that such cheating takes the “honor” out of honors, forsaking the intellectual effort required of the honors mind to the mindless pursuit of the A.

I also discuss with honors freshmen my struggles with what I call Former Honors Student Syndrome. I, too, had been a product of gifted and honors programs since the age of four, and my “B is for Bad” epistemology continued well into my first teaching assistant assignment. Through a heady mix of naïveté and arrogance, I was afraid that my background as an honors student who had always earned high grades for writing would somehow skew my ability to provide a fair evaluation for papers from non-honors students. To overcompensate, I gave out As and Bs like Halloween candy. I was also

allowed by the writing program administrator to revive a dormant section of honors composition, and since I had recently graduated from the very honors program served by this honors composition section, I knew how important A grades were to the honors students. At the end of that term, the writing program administrator pulled me aside with a copy of my final grade sheet, which had more As than Fonzie from *Happy Days*, and asked me a question that has since become the cornerstone of my grading in honors courses: "Would these students have earned an A in a regular course?" At the time, I responded wholeheartedly in the affirmative, but now, more than fifteen years later, I know better.

To address that question of comparison and to counter those issues of perceived subjectivity and intense "grade-grubbing," I strive to be fair and consistent in my grading, not just in my honors courses but throughout all my teaching. I do not grade honors students' papers differently than those of non-honors students, a practice supported by our freshman writing program's custom-published resources manual, which is used across all sections of English 101, 102, and 105(H). This manual, established and maintained by our excellent writing program administrator, includes not only policies and university resources but also a list of "Shared Criteria for Writing," such as organization and development, and a set grading scale that includes letter grades and corresponding numerical scores to be used across all composition sections. When designing my syllabi and assignment sheets, I include *in writing* as much information about additional criteria for that specific assignment as I can. I remind honors students that they would indeed earn the same grades if they enrolled with me for a regular composition course with similar types of writing tasks and that I do not grade their papers either "easier" or "harder" because they are honors students. When a student asks how to earn an A on the next paper, I respond, "Write an A paper." When a student asks how to improve her writing using the "Shared Criteria," then we can talk.

Overall, fifteen years after I taught my first honors composition course, I feel confident that I have achieved a workable equilibrium between my disciplinary training's call for thorough, thoughtful evaluation of student writing and my own hyperawareness of the importance of grades to honors students. I have finally accepted that trying to sustain a useful class discussion on the day after the first papers have been returned is futile because half of the class will be pouting with arms crossed or heads firmly planted on desktops. I have vowed to continue writing qualitative comments for students' papers, whether the students read them or not, because I want students to know that writing is too complex to be reduced to a simple letter or number grade. And ironically, as I cajole my students to remove grades as a component of their self-perceptions, I find that part of my identity as a professor, or at least the honors

## EVALUATION VS. GRADING IN HONORS COMPOSITION

students' perception of me as a professor, is being shaped by the grades I assign (although I'm too self-conscious to frequent "Rate My Professor"). At last spring's interview day for prospective honors students, I overheard one of my freshmen telling a group of candidates, "That's Dr. Guzy. She teaches honors freshman comp. You'll get a C on the first paper and you'll hate her, but after that everything's fine and you'll love her." I can live with that.

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